FOLKLORE: PROGRAMMING IN THE RURAL COMMUNITY

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Much of the literature on the subject of rural librarianship indicates that many rural librarians are faced with staff shortages, limited collections, insufficient funding, and remoteness from the cultural resources located in urban centers. In spite of these handicaps, rural librarians can sponsor viable folklore programs for their patrons.

In fact, the rural library is, in many ways, an ideal forum for folklore programming. The paraprofessional librarian does not need a degree in order to develop skill as a folktale-teller, and is probably better able to identify local resource people who can be persuaded to share their skills in library programs than the professional librarian who is not a lifelong resident of the community.

The handicap of limited collections can also be circumvented by borrowing folklore materials through interlibrary

loan. If planning is done far enough in advance, a program can be developed using books, records, and films requested from the district library center, regional library system, or other interlibrary loan source. Limited program funding need not present an obstacle since programming can be conducted at little expense.

The most compelling argument in support of sponsoring folklore programming in rural libraries is the fact that such activities can combat the isolation that rural dwellers experience. The rural American lives, on the average, fifty-two miles from a city of 25,000 or more.[1] In addition, he/she has little or no access to public transportation.

Through exposure to the folklore of other races and regions, children who live in rural areas can gain familiarity with foreign cultures. Folktale tellers introduce children to aspects of life which lie outside their immediate experience. Tale-telling sessions can recreate the wonders of ancient times for contemporary children and function to connect the present with the past. The study of folk literature builds bridges between peoples -- tying rural dwellers to their neighbors far and near by fostering respect and tolerance based on an understanding of other cultures. Listening to traditional tales that reflect the folklore of various countries develops

and deepens children's appreciation of literature. The library that offers programs for different age groups can encourage children to become lifelong library users.

Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend offers twenty-six definitions of the word "folklore." This confusion dates back to 1846, the year William Thoms coined the term as an alternative to the unwieldy phrase "popular antiquities."[2]

What all definitions of the term "folklore" share in common is the idea that folklore is traditional -- it is knowledge that has been handed down from generation to generation, either by oral transmission or by customary example. Although the discipline of folklore embraces a wide variety of subjects, four main branches of inquiry can be identified: oral literature, which includes the folktale, myth, and legend; folklife or material culture which includes traditional crafts and folk art; folk belief as expressed in custom, ritual, and superstition; and the performing arts which include folk dance and folk music.

This paper will offer rural librarians an alternative to the traditional storyhour by suggesting folklore programming options. It is possible to structure entire programs around material representative of the various branches of folklore --

crafts, holiday customs, myths, songs, and tales. Librarians who are reluctant to jump in at the deep end can get their feet wet by incorporating one song or tale at a time into existing storyhour programs until they have built up a repertoire of folk materials they can present with confidence.

Why do folktales and other oral genres constitute excellent storyhour resources? Folktales, myths and legends are the products of preliterate societies. Preschool and elementary-age children are at a preliterate stage in their development. They will pass through several stages of language development before they achieve literacy. Civilizations also pass through these stages of language development and this parallel development is what makes the content of folk literature particularly suitable for children. Children are members of an oral group and are natural bearers of oral tradition since they have not yet learned to rely on the written word. They share a body of underground traditional lore that includes jumprope rhymes, singing games and dance-songs. Because they have not yet developed a dependency on the written word they are able to remember and repeat tales and songs they have heard.

One of the objectives of the traditional storyhour has been to promote the development of the child's listening

ability and attention span. But, when a storyteller reads from books without maintaining eye-contact with the audience, or memorizes the text of a story and attempts to deliver it verbatim (betraying resentment each time a child interrupts the flow) then storyhour falls short of its goal.

When practiced in the traditional manner, tale-telling is an effective method of promoting listening skills. As the product of an oral tradition, the folktale has no preferred or frozen text. Instead, the oral tale is recreated with every telling. As tales pass from one teller to another, they undergo change. Each new narrator makes both conscious and unconscious alterations in the narrative.

Since the tale-teller is not locked in to recounting a written text, he/she can adapt the narration to the audience. The process of oral transmission is characterized by audience participation. The distinguished folktale scholar, Linda Degh, noted that the winter tales told in Hungarian villages were interrupted by interjections and cries of appreciation from the audience.[3]

Professional tale-teller Richard Chase takes children's comments and questions in stride and invites their participation in the stories he tells.[4] The end result is a dialogue which permits interaction between the narrator and each

listener. The voice and personality of the narrator lifts the story from the printed page and breathes life into it. Tale-telling requires listeners to use their imaginations to conjure up the word pictures evoked by the narrator.

Thus, folktales, myths and legends can be used to lengthen a child's attention span. The ability to listen and absorb information is a prerequisite to the acquisition of reading skills. By fostering interest in the books tales are taken from, a librarian can stimulate a child's desire to read.

Television is a pervasive influence on rural dwellers who have very limited access to live cultural events. Two young women who seek to counteract television's effect on juvenile audiences have gone on the road, traveling to libraries, folk festivals and schools as freelance "folktellers." These former librarians, Barbara Freeman and Connie Regan, are "...trying to restore what television is destroying -- the ability to visualize, to use one's imagination."[5] Since watching television is a passive activity, too much exposure to the medium can literally turn children into "couch potatoes."

At the turn-of-the-century librarians at the Boston Public Library who designed storyhour programs for first generation immigrant children utilized quality folk literature

to combat the influence of shallow movies and dime novels. Storyhours have now been a traditional aspect of public library service to children for three generations.

A recent Danish sociological study of nine to twelve year-olds entitled The Smurfs, Tarzan, and Donald Duck revealed that children from underprivileged homes, both rural and urban, were generally exposed to the lowest kind of culture, "...culture dominated by commercial output."[6] The Danish Ministry of Culture concluded that the library has a responsibility to provide children with alternatives to commercial culture. Librarians can offer children an alternative to the shallow plots provided in superhero comic books by introducing them to traditional literature that relates the exploits of authentic folk heroes whose popularity has withstood the test of time.

In an editorial which seriously questioned television's value as an educational medium, S. Dillion Ripley, a former Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, wrote, "Look backward lest you fail to mark the path ahead ...Surely the lessons of history should help to clear the mists of the present..."[7] The origins of folktales, legends and myths are shrouded in the mists of prehistory. Passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth, they record the history and mores

of a culture. In primitive societies these genres of oral literature functioned on two levels -- as a form of entertainment and as the core of a culture's educational system, a vehicle for transmitting tribal customs, history and manners.

Why should librarians, particularly rural librarians, endeavor to expose children to folk literature? While children need books that offer insight into their own culture, they should also be introduced to books that can help them see the world from another perspective. The child who gains familiarity with folk literature from several countries will be struck by the universal character traits shared by people who belong to different cultures. For example, the trickster figure, an anti-hero, crops up in the tales of Africa, Oceania, and of the American Indians. Northrup Frye, a well-known literary critic, observed that the oral tales of widely-dispersed cultures shared many common features, and further maintained that written literature borrowed heavily from oral sources: "All themes and characters and stories that you encounter in literature belong to one big interlocking family."[8]

By teaching children to appreciate traditional literature, a librarian can pave the way to lifelong interest in the

written word. Through listening to folktales and legends, children are exposed to imagery and are required to exercise their imaginations. In doing so, they develop an appreciation for figurative language.

Hopefully this has convinced you that folklore programming is both practical and desirable. Now it is time to take a closer look at the oral genres that can function as the building blocks for a folklore progam.

The term "folktale" is a generic term used for a variety of narrative forms including marchen or fairytales, animal tales and cyclical tales. Myths are frequently etiological, i.e. they represent man's attempt to explain the nature of the world around him. Myths provide accounts of the Creation or explain seasonal cycles and geological formations. Legends relay the history of a culture in story form and are based upon the exploits of national heroes. A kernel of fact can be found at the heart of each legend, but it has been overlaid with fictitious accretions. Folksongs are perpetuated through oral tradition; they are learned by ear from members of the performer's own community. Few of the compositions performed by folksingers in coffeehouses today are genuine folksongs. Several other genres of oral literature which lend themselves to folklore programs include fables, proverbs and riddles.

The librarian who is responsible for selecting folklore materials for a public or school library must learn to distinguish between worthwhile and inferior anthologies of folktales, legends and myths just as he/she has learned to distinguish between good and bad examples of juvenile fiction. Evaluating the worth of folk literature collections calls for a new set of selection criteria.

Folk narratives cannot be judged by the standards used to evaluate either fiction or nonfiction. As stated previously, oral tales from widely-separated cultures contain striking similarities. They embody archetypal images such as the cruel stepmother and the omnivorous giant, stock characters which Carl Gustav Jung interpreted as expressions of the collective unconscious. These tales frequently portray aggressive, antisocial behavior or wish fulfillment. Because they do not reflect a true-to-life cultural milieu, they do not exhibit the realism that critics demand of literary fiction.

Oral narratives are composed of a series of episodes strung together like beads on a string. A brief introduction sets the scene by presenting the setting, characters and major conflict. This is followed in quick succession by other episodes that carry the story along, building suspense

through the use of repetition, to a satisfying conclusion in which the folk hero triumphs over his more powerful adversary. Written texts of oral narratives should exhibit a similar economy of description and avoid didactic moralizing.

The best anthologies of oral literature are those compiled by fieldworkers who have collected their texts directly from native informants. To insure accuracy, fieldworkers use sound-recording equipment to capture tale-telling sessions on tape. They later produce verbatim transcripts of these narratives. A librarian should ascertain whether or not the editor or compiler of an anthology of folk literature actually engaged in fieldwork in the country whose lore he has published.

The works of Harold Courlander, a well-known folklorist and author of several books of African folklore, furnish examples that other compilers of oral literature collections would do well to emulate. Although he edited his texts, he made minimal changes so that the tales remained faithful to the spoken word. In Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes (Crown, 1973) Courlander provided a preliminary historical sketch of the Yoruba people and their gods, provided background notes for each narrative and included appendices which describe

Yoruba narratives, religious traditions and songs.

Once a librarian is certain that a collector did indeed have direct contact with the oral lore of the community in question, he/she must evaluate how well the collector documented his material. A collector should provide the following details regarding the source of his material so we know that the tales presented are not merely the products of his imagination: (1) the informant's name and possibly his occupation or status in the community, (2) the date and location of the tale-telling session or fieldwork interview and (3) the context in which the tale was told, including some indication if it was performed as part of a holiday celebration or a seasonal observance.

Collections of tales compiled from literary texts or other secondary (printed) sources need not be automatically rejected. But the editor of such a collection should provide thorough documentation of his sources and clearly state whether he discovered the narratives in a folklore archive or included tales which were published previously. In either case, the editor should cite the provenance of his narratives and include all the documentation provided in the primary source.

In addition to information regarding the provenance of the tales, some commentary on the tales themselves should be

included. This may take the form of notes explaining the beliefs, customs and values embedded in the tales or a listing of cross-cultural versions and comparative analysis of the texts. Annotations such as these need not necessarily accompany books of simple tales for very young readers, but they should be featured in collections intended for older readers.

A third issue to be considered when evaluating a collection of oral literature is the collector's objectivity. He should not impose his own values on the texts he has collected. The collector should neither censor nor otherwise edit the material he has gathered, or the oral character of the texts will be destroyed and the resulting tales will be literary creations.

The brothers Grimm, who collected tales extensively in the Hesse-Cassel region of Germany during the first three decades of the last century, adapted the texts they recorded. They censored the texts published in the Household Tales and their other collections in order to protect children from vulgarities and to avoid offending middle-class morality. Ironically, years later Adolph Hitler used the Grimm's folktales as a vehicle for disseminating his ideology. During the 1930's, the Nazis published a massive body of folk

literature carefully edited to promote the concept of a "herrenvolk" united by the mystical bonds of blood, culture, language and tradition. Hitler instructed that folktales which incorporated violence and cruel acts be used in the schools and that each house should have its own copy of the newly edited Household Tales so that children might be indoctrinated with a sense of German militarism.

For many years Walt Disney engaged in a similar, if less reprehensible, reshaping of folklore. He plundered fairy tales and rewrote them to reflect his own vision of a world that was, in effect, a global village. Disney "Americanized" his make-believe world, creating countries like San Bananador and the province of Footsore. This homogenization of cultural diversity successfully allowed Disney to project the North American experience onto alien cultures. Disney's cultural industry produced a bland, mass-media culture that leveled its messages at the lowest common denominator.

A few writers have gone a step further and created so-called folk heroes out of whole cloth! Some of America's most well-known legendary figures -- Paul Bunyan, the Minnesota lumberjack; Old Stormalong, the Yankee sailor; and Joe Magarac, hero of Pittsburgh's steelworkers -- were

literary inventions contrived by clever public relations men.

Academic folklorists have found no genuine oral legends that relate the exploits of these characters. Dr. Richard Dorson, Director of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University until his death in 1981, was justifiably critical of anthologists such as Ben Botkin, Carl Carmer and Mortiz Jagendorf who produced romantic, sentimental "literary confections" -- tales that had been edited beyond recognition. Dr. Dorson coined the term "fakelore" to describe this type of ersatz folklore.[9] Obviously, librarians should select materials that describe the exploits of genuine folk heroes. A list of genuine American folk heroes can be found in Dorson's book America in Legend (Pantheon Books, 1973).

Ariel Dorfman, author of The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes do to our Minds (Pantheon Books, 1983) observed that newer cultural heroes such as the Lone Ranger are not genuine creations of the folk community. They have not withstood the test of time. Generations have not shaped their development so that they reflect the dreams and aspirations of their creators. Dorfman regrets the fact that: "The popular masses that consume the industrial myth in its newest form have not participated in its

development, in the battle for its modification."[10]

Through the years, writers and critics have expressed diverse opinions regarding the advisability of exposing children to folk literature. The issue was debated as recently as the 1970's.

Plato included this sentiment in The Republic: The proper education for ideal citizens is to be found in traditional tales and myths.[11] He believed that the first stories a child heard should be carefully chosen in order to produce the best possible effect on his character. Jean Jacques Rousseau criticized educators who introduced children to folktales; he thought that flights of fancy belonging to the distant past had no place in the modern world and that folk literature contributed nothing to the moral and intellectual development of the child.[12] Rousseau's opinion found favor with Lucy Sprague Mitchell, leader of the modern realism movement, who argued that children should be exposed to stories such as The Red Gasoline Pump which reflect the everyday world.[13]

Charles Dickens believed that children were entitled to read unexpurgated folktales and he wrote a famous essay entitled "Frauds on the Fairies" which attacked teetotalers and bowdlerizers who produced bland revisions of tales in

deference to Victorian sensibilities.[14]

The Italian educator Maria Montessori (who did not believe in punishing or rewarding her students) expressed the opinion that fairy tales, which often stressed the "law of retribution," i.e. punishment of the wicked, were "...morbid, pathological and deadly."[15] However, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, author of The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (Knopf, 1976) applauded the sound justice system reflected in folktales. Russian poet and literary critic Kornei Chukovsky agreed with Bettelheim that folktales provide an acceptable outlet which allows children to project suppressed wishes and desires. Chukovsky echoed Bettelheim's premise that folktales permit children to act out in imagination behavior which would be socially unacceptable in real life.[16]

In his introduction to Folk Literature and Children; An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials (Greenwood Press, 1981) George Shannon stated, "Adults worry that children will be frightened by tales, or moved to violent behavior as a result of being influenced by them."[17] Critics of folk literature have argued that exposing children to the violence contained in the tales can be as harmful as exposing them to violence portrayed on television. But Chukovsky noted that

life is often violent, and that when violence is met through the filter of literature, it is given an aesthetic distance and perspective. The poet W.H. Auden felt that the repetition of frightening episodes in tales allowed children to master their fears and that familiarity with a tale reduced the fearful element.[18]

The controversy regarding the advisability of exposing children to folk literature has largely been put to rest, thanks to Bettelheim. Contemporary scholars agree that rewriting or updating traditional tales amounts to a destruction of our cultural heritage. But if violent and fearful episodes in folktales are not softened or minimized, how can we insure that young children are not exposed to stories that may frighten them? Linda Degh suggested a common sense solution to this dilemma in an article entitled "Grimm's Household Tales and Its Place in the Household: The Social Relevance of a Controversial Classic."[19] She urged parents and teachers to use discretion when choosing tales to share with children and advised them to choose tales suited to the child's stage of development, and to reserve harsh,gory tales for older audiences. Not all folktales are violent; many stress the importance of living by one's wits rather than relying on brute strength.

An American cycle of tall tales known as "The Jack Tales," which was imported from the British Isles, features the exploits of a hero named Jack. Jack is a quick-witted character, a trickster hero, who outwits giants, unicorns and other foes by using cunning rather than physical force. The Jack Tales were popular with the early settlers of North Carolina, perhaps because they featured a hero who surmounted all obstacles and embodied the stamina and spirit of the pioneers themselves. Richard Chase collected a number of these tales and published them in a book entitled The Jack Tales (Houghton Mifflen Co., 1971): "Jack in the Giant's Newground," "Jack and the Beantree" and "Jack and the Varmints" whose English variants are probably more familiar to readers: "Jack and the Giant Killer," "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "The Valiant Tailor."

The Jack Tales were passed on from generation to generation for two important reasons. The most obvious, practical reason for their survival was that tale-telling furnished entertainment for children and adults while they were engaged in communal tasks such as corn-husking. On a deeper level, these tales portrayed a character who was able to make light of hardship, a necessary skill for frontier dwellers.

Native American tall tales, referred to as "whoppers" or "fish stories" are excellent resources for storytelling because they have a dynamic appeal -- they have been adapted to suit North American conditions and tastes. The tall tale is the most typical of all American folktales. In these tales facts are exaggerated to the nth degree, which is not surprising when one considers that America must have seemed like a limitless wilderness to the first white settlers who arrived from the comparatively small nations of Europe.

The librarian who accepts the premise that folklore programming can function to acquaint children with the life-styles of other cultures and can combat cultural isolation must be prepared to use a variety of media if all the children in the storyhour audience are to be educated and entertained. Children's librarian Rebekah Sheller noted:

> Goals of library service for children often include providing children with a variety of experiences through various media, which will assist with emotional and intellectual growth.[20]

Children rely on one of several methods of learning. They may learn through seeing, through hearing, or through touching. Therefore, incorporating a broad spectrum of media in folklore programs is essential if each child is to be reached.

Folktale programs can be enhanced by the addition of other media such as fingerplays, folk art (costumes, crafts, toys), folk music, and puppetry which will focus attention and reinforce the impact of the tales that are told.

Several years ago I presented an African folktale program that was designed for an audience of third and fourth graders. This program incorporated several types of media including costumes, crafts, and recordings of African drum music. A member of the public library's friends group loaned her collection of cloth and straw handicrafts from the island of Madagascar to the library for the program. With the assistance of another staff member, I arranged the artifacts in one of the library's basement meeting rooms and created a colorful setting for the program. I consulted several geography sets in the children's collection -- the Unicef Hi Neighbor series (Hastings House, 1960's) and Lexicon's Lands and People (Grolier Ed. Corp., 1978) that provided information on the clothing, crafts, and history of Madagascar.

While the children arrived, I played a Folkways recording of African drum music borrowed from the District Center through Interlibrary loan. Dressed in native costume, I introduced the folktales by describing the context in which

the tales were originally told -- how, at the end of the day, as shadows lengthened, families gathered in the center of the village to listen to stories about the wily rabbit or about the trickster spider, Anansi. This helped to establish a mood for the tales which followed -- tales from collections by Harold Courlander and Joyce Cooper Arkhurst.

Although librarians won't have access to artifacts from foreign countries for every folklore program they present, they can use folk music to establish a mood for folktale programs. It is relatively easy to locate recordings of folk music from many countries. Anyone who can play a few simple chords on the guitar or autoharp can accompany most folksongs which are generally built on three basic chords. The songs do not require any accompaniment if the storyteller can carry a tune. Ruth Crawford Seeger's songbooks American Folk Songs for Children (Doubleday, 1948) and Animal Folk Songs for Children (Doubleday, 1950) are excellent sources for songs; the author transcribed these songs from field recordings held by the Archive of Folk Culture in the Library of Congress.

Programs based on American tales can be augmented with show-and-tell demonstrations of native folk toys. Many modern manufactured toys feature built-in obsolescence.

But folk toys are handmade from inexpensive natural materials such as apples, nuts, corncobs, spools, string and wood. Two books which provide instructions and patterns for making traditional toys (applehead dolls, climbing bears, gee-haw whimmy diddles, and limber jacks) include Eliot Wigginton's Foxfire 6 (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980) and Dick Schnacke's American Folk Toys (G.P. Putnam's, 1973). What differentiates these toys from commercial products is the fact that their prototypes were handmade by craftsmen who followed instructions handed down from generation to generation.

Librarians who want their folklore programs to be both entertaining and educational can acquaint children with the social customs of the country whose tales are featured. For example, a storyhour based on American tales could be augmented by a discussion of early settler customs such as barn-raisings or quilting and husking bees. Bobbie Kalman's Early Settler Life series (Crabtree Publishing Co., 1982) which includes the volumes Early Christmas, Early Village Life and Early Settler Children is an excellent source of information regarding early American social customs and crafts.

Rural librarians are frequently delegated the task of coordinating children's programs. What resources can they call upon to assist them in implementing creative programs?

Since the librarian is frequently a longtime resident of the community, he/she can enlist the aid of other community members who possess special skills (artists, craftsmen, musicians, storytellers) to supplement their programs. Volunteers and members of friends groups can be encouraged to assist with special holiday programs and puppet shows. Some high schools sponsor a speaker's bureau (a speech or drama club) whose members give speeches or present story-hour programs.

A selected bibliography of folklore resources is provided at the conclusion of this article. It is not a list of scholarly texts. The bibliography is designed to furnish titles of collections which librarians can consult when planning folklore programs for children. Finally, rural librarians should not hesitate to ask their system's children's services coordinator or state library children's services consultant for assistance.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Bernard Vavrek, "The Hidden Majority: Rediscovering Rural Libraries," Wilson Library Bulletin, Volume 58, #4, p.267, December 1983.

[2]Maria Leach, ed., Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1972, p.1109.

[3]Linda Degh, Folktales and Society: Story-telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community. Trs. by Emily M. Schossberger. Indiana University Press, 1969, p.117.

[4]May Hill Arbuthnot and Mark Taylor, comps., Time for Old Magic, Scott, Foresman and Company, Atlanta, 1970, p.352.

[5]Barbara Home Stewart, "Folktellers: Sheherazades in Denim," School Library Journal, Volume 25, No.12, p.20, November 1978.

[6]Committees on Children and Culture, Danish Ministry of Culture, "The Smurfs, Tarzan and Donald Duck," Bibliotek, Volume 76, No.21, pp.698-709, 1980.

[7]S. Dillon Ripley, "The View from the Castle," Smithsonian, Volume 13, No. 7, p.12, October 1982.

[8]Northrup Frye, The Educated Imagination, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1964, p.48.

[9]Richard M. Dorson, ed., Folktales Told around the World, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975, pp.9-10.

[10]Ariel Dorfman, The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes do to our Minds, Pantheon Books, New York, 1983, p.105.

[11]George W.B. Shannon, Folk Literature and Children; An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1981, p.xi.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Arbuthnot, p.342.

[17]Shannon, p.xii.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Linda Degh, "Grimm's Household Tales and its Place in the Household: The Social Relevance of a Controversial Classic," Western Folklore, Volume 38, No.2, p.92, April 1979.

[20]Rebekah Sheller, "Kids are the Issue: Rural Libraries and Children's Services," Rural Libraries, Volume 3, No.2, p.98, 1983.

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